

Critics say money spent on California delta has produced little

By Don Thompson
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STOCKTON – Frustrated members of Congress vented their anger at efforts to save California's most crucial water source, saying millions of dollars have been spent to study problems in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta with little to show for it.

Water managers have spent 15 years “spending literally hundreds of millions of dollars, and billions of dollars in lost economic activity, and none of that has worked,” U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, said Monday during a field hearing focused on the delta's problems.

Pombo, chairman of the House Resources Committee and a critic of the federal Endangered Species Act, called the hearing to focus attention on the decline of four key delta fish species. The plight of the fish has raised concerns that the overall health of the vast estuary is being jeopardized by pesticides, agricultural pumping, invasive species and other problems.

The delta is the linchpin of California's water supply, draining 42 percent of the state's land mass and providing drinking water to two-thirds of the state. It also is the key water source for one of the nation's most fertile farming regions.

Scientific studies cost \$2 million last year and are projected to cost \$3.7 million this year in an attempt to find a cause for the historic drop in the number of delta smelt, striped bass, longfin smelt and threadfin shad.

Implementing steps to save those species could cost millions more, according to state water officials, and could disrupt plans to divert more of the delta's water for Central Valley agriculture and Southern California water agencies.

Criticism of the attempts to solve the delta's many problems – and reconcile the needs of the farmers, fishermen and municipalities that depend on it – was bipartisan during Monday's hearing.

“After all the time being under the microscope, you'd think we'd know more than we do,” said U.S. Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Norwalk.

She said answers are needed “not two years from now but hopefully this year.”

U.S. Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Atwater, said blame has centered variously on the pumps that divert water to farmers and cities, on power plants, on invasive species, on a decline in the food chain and on toxic contamination. He said the lack of answers has been disappointing.

“Instead of seeing improvements, the problem seems to be getting worse,” Cardoza said. “Shutting down the pumps has wasted money and water and time.”

Fishermen, environmentalists and political opponents of Pombo also attended the hearing in this port city south of Sacramento and said water diversions are primarily to blame for the delta's environmental decline.

U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, criticized state and federal water managers for proposing an increase in pumping without first studying whether it will further damage the delta.

Biologists' previous recommendations to reduce pumping in an effort to save fish species have sometimes been ignored or delayed, said Miller, a former chairman of the committee.

"We really don't know yet" the effect of the pumping on fish, said Mike Chotkowski, a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the agency that runs the federal pumps. "We're working on it."

The delta is a complex ecosystem with many annual variables in water flow, temperature, pumping and other factors, Ted Sommer, chief of the California Department of Water Resources' aquatic ecology section, said in response to the criticism leveled Monday.

"We still have a lot of questions that we need to answer over the next couple of years," he said.

■ On the Net:
House Resources Committee: resourcescommittee.house.gov

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